

Lincoln Diaz-Balart

1954–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 1993–2011
REPUBLICAN FROM FLORIDA

A refugee of the 1959 Cuban Revolution with deep family ties to the island's politics in the era before Fidel Castro, Lincoln Diaz-Balart was a leading congressional voice for reform in the Cuban government and for immigrants' rights. Beginning with his election to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1992, he advocated for the fair treatment of legal immigrants and refugees and for the maintenance of vigorous economic sanctions against Cuba. "I'm friends with anyone who's fighting Castro because that's the supreme cause," Diaz-Balart once said.¹

Lincoln Diaz-Balart was born in Havana, Cuba, on August 13, 1954, to Rafael Lincoln and Hilda Caballero Diaz-Balart. He and his brothers, Rafael, Jose, and Mario, were born into a family that had long been involved in Cuba's government. Diaz-Balart's grandfather, father, and uncle served in Cuba's house of representatives, and his father was president of the senate under President Fulgencio Batista.² Diaz-Balart's aunt was briefly married to Fidel Castro and was the mother of Castro's only recognized child. In 1959 Diaz-Balart and his family fled Cuba after their home was looted and burned by pro-Castro forces during the Cuban Revolution. They lived in New York, Fort Lauderdale, Venezuela, and Spain before settling in Miami.³ Lincoln attended the American School in Madrid, Spain, and graduated from the University of South Florida in Sarasota with a degree in international relations in 1976. He went on to study British politics in Cambridge, England, and earned his law degree from Case Western University in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1979. Diaz-Balart worked in private practice in Miami before serving as an assistant state's attorney. He and his wife Cristina raised two sons, Lincoln and Daniel.

Diaz-Balart got his start in politics leading the Florida Young Democrats and running an unsuccessful campaign for the Florida legislature as a Democrat in 1982. But

he began to identify with the Republican Party during the Ronald W. Reagan administration, co-chairing the Democrats for Reagan Campaign in 1984. He formally switched his party allegiance in 1985, citing what he described as Democrats' lenient policy toward communism in Nicaragua and El Salvador. He was elected to the state house of representatives in 1986, and three years later he won a special election for a seat in the state senate.⁴ While in the Florida legislature, Diaz-Balart sponsored laws strengthening sentences for crimes against law enforcement officers, increasing penalties for drug-related money laundering, providing low-interest loans for home construction, creating a statewide program to combat substance abuse, and establishing disclosure rules for Florida companies doing business with Cuba.⁵

After the 1990 Census, Florida created a new congressional district encompassing portions of Kendall, Westchester, Sweetwater, and Hialeah and stretching to the west and south of downtown Miami. Hispanic Americans constituted 71 percent of the voting-age population. In the Republican primary, Diaz-Balart faced fellow state senator Javier Souto, who was also Cuban-born. Each candidate attempted to portray himself as the greater champion of Cuba's freedom.⁶ Diaz-Balart proved a more efficient fundraiser and secured the party's nomination with 69 percent of the vote. He had no opposition in the general election.⁷ In four of his next five re-election bids, Diaz-Balart was unopposed. In 1998 Democrat Patrick Cusack ran against him but lost, 74 to 26 percent. In his final three general election campaigns, Diaz-Balart faced opposition but won by wide margins.⁸

Diaz-Balart was sworn in as a Member of the 103rd Congress (1993–1995) on January 5, 1993, and was placed on the Foreign Affairs and Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committees. Leaders quickly tapped him for



prominent assignments after the Republicans regained the House majority during the 1994 election, and Diaz-Balart relinquished his initial assignments for seats on the House Oversight Committee and the powerful Rules Committee.⁹ He left the former at the end of the 104th Congress (1995–1997) but retained the Rules Committee assignment—where he worked closely with leadership to shape and pulse bills for consideration on the floor—for the rest of his House career. Diaz-Balart eventually chaired two subcommittees: the Rules Committee’s Legislative and Budget Process Subcommittee in the 109th Congress (2005–2007) and the Select Committee on Homeland Security’s Rules Subcommittee in the 108th Congress (2003–2005). In 2001 Speaker J. Dennis Hastert of Illinois appointed him to the Republican Policy Committee, which was in charge of developing the GOP’s legislative agenda. In the 108th Congress, Diaz-Balart also served on the Select Committee on Homeland Security, but left the panel when it became a standing committee in the next Congress.¹⁰

Representing a solidly conservative working-class district, Diaz-Balart occasionally demonstrated his willingness to break with his party to support immigrant rights and worker protections. He was one of only three Republicans who did not sign the Contract with America in 1994, and he opposed the 1996 welfare reform legislation—a pillar of the Contract with America—because of scheduled cuts to Supplemental Security Income (SSI) for legal immigrants.¹¹ “When people follow the law and they pay taxes, they shouldn’t be singled out for discrimination,” he said.¹² He successfully championed legislation postponing the SSI cuts, which passed the House by a vote of 345 to 74 on May 15, 1997.¹³ He also strenuously opposed efforts to prevent the children of undocumented immigrants from enrolling in public schools and fought successfully to get the provision dropped from the 1996 Immigration Act. The House voted to pass the provision as a stand-alone measure, but it never cleared the Senate.¹⁴

On this and other immigration issues, Diaz-Balart often allied with two Floridians, fellow Cuban-American Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and Democrat Carrie Meek, whose congressional district included a large

Haitian population. In the 105th and 106th Congresses (1997–2001), Diaz-Balart helped shape legislation that prevented the deportation of thousands of refugees from countries in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the former Eastern Bloc under retroactively applied provisions of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) of 1996.¹⁵ “I think it is our moral obligation and a requirement of elemental fairness that at the very least these refugees be considered under the rules in existence when they filed their applications,” he said of Nicaraguan immigrants on the House Floor while arguing for a measure that eventually passed as the Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act. “I have witnessed in South Florida how they have made significant social, economic and cultural contributions to my community.... My bill ensures that these refugees will be able to obtain basic procedural justice in recognition of their historically unique and important circumstances.”¹⁶ In 2007 Diaz-Balart sponsored legislation to allow two Colombian college students whose parents brought them to the United States illegally when they were two and three years of age to remain in the country. He used their example to support legislation that would allow in-state tuition for the children of undocumented immigrants and provide them a path to citizenship.¹⁷

Diaz-Balart’s central objective in the House was to promote freedom and democracy in Cuba, and he organized the Cuba Democracy Group to rally support.¹⁸ He strongly advocated preserving and strengthening economic sanctions against the Castro regime. In the 104th Congress, Diaz-Balart sponsored the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act of 1996 (H.R. 927), which codified the existing trade embargo against Cuba.¹⁹ On the House Floor, Diaz-Balart declared, “Mr. Speaker, the Cuban people are facing an avalanche of collaborationism by governments and investors in the international community who are seriously considering, and in a few instances, accepting, the Cuban dictator’s invitation to come in and partake of his oppression of Cuban workers, his guaranteed denial of all labor rights, and his fire sale of the island at dirt cheap prices to foreign capitalists.”

He lashed out at the Cuban military for shooting down two unarmed civilian U.S. planes in international waters in early 1996, arguing that this action justified continued economic sanctions.²⁰ He said that opponents of a hard-line policy toward the Castro regime—many of whom supported sanctions in the 1980s against South Africa’s apartheid regime—displayed a “double standard” that was “insidious, hypocritical, and objectionable.”²¹

Diaz-Balart was an early and a strong critic of the William J. (Bill) Clinton administration’s movement toward engagement with Cuba’s communist regime, and in 1995 he was arrested outside the White House in a peaceful protest.²² He decried the Clinton administration’s 1998 decision to ease some of the provisions of the embargo, while refusing to automatically grant Cuban refugees safe haven in the United States. “All this does is send a political victory to Castro,” Diaz-Balart argued. “While Castro is throwing people in dungeons, President Clinton looks for wiggle room under current law to send a signal of good relations to Castro.”²³ In 2000 Diaz-Balart and Representative Ros-Lehtinen of Florida opposed efforts by farm-state Members to ease the Cuban embargo. While failing to completely preserve the embargo, Diaz-Balart and his pro-embargo colleagues succeeded in imposing limitations on sales to Cuba and in preserving the prohibition on travel to Cuba. They also forced restrictions to prevent federal or U.S. commercial financing for food exports.²⁴ Additionally, Diaz-Balart opposed legislation benefiting governments that replicated or supported Cuba’s oppressive policies. “International capitalism is pouring billions of dollars into the coffers of the communist oppressors, billions that they use to maintain their oppressive apparatus,” he said.²⁵ Diaz-Balart opposed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1993, principally because the governments of Mexico and Canada had closer ties to the Cuban regime.²⁶

In late 1999, the story of a young Cuban boy named Elián González riveted the nation. The U.S. Coast Guard rescued the child at sea after the boat carrying Elián, his mother, and a dozen other refugees sank. Elián’s mother perished, and his father, who had remained in

Cuba, sought his son’s return. When the Immigration and Naturalization Service removed González from the home of relatives in Miami in April 2000 so that the boy could be returned to his family—an event that was widely covered by the media—Diaz-Balart called the government’s action “a monstrosity.”²⁷ Castro disdained Lincoln and his brother, Mario—elected to the U.S. House in 2002—as “miserable Judases.”²⁸

Diaz-Balart’s years in public service earned him a reputation as a skilled legislator and politician who was unwilling to shy away from controversy when his priorities were at stake. In his freshman year, he successfully defunded a \$23 million project from the district of an appropriator who had defunded anti-communist radio broadcasts into Cuba.²⁹ In January 1997, when the chairman of the Hispanic Caucus traveled to Cuba to meet with Castro, Diaz-Balart and Representative Ros-Lehtinen quickly announced that they would withdraw from the caucus and would rejoin only if the chairman called for free and fair elections in Cuba.³⁰ “There has to be a limit to insensitivity, and going to meet the Cuban tyrant ... is beyond the pale. It’s unacceptable. It’s too much,” Diaz-Balart said.³¹ In March 2003, Diaz-Balart, Ros-Lehtinen, and three other Republican Members formed the Congressional Hispanic Conference as an alternative to the Hispanic Caucus.³²

While the Democrats made significant gains in the House in 2006, Diaz-Balart nonetheless won election, with nearly 60 percent of the vote.³³ In 2008 he faced his most serious challenger, Raul Martinez, formerly a mayor of Hialeah. Martinez criticized Diaz-Balart for focusing too much on Cuba and for supporting restrictions on family travel and remittance to the island. Highlighting his record of supporting immigrants and bringing federal money to the district for highway construction, Diaz-Balart prevailed with a comfortable 58 percent of the vote.³⁴ However, midway through the 111th Congress (2009–2011), Diaz-Balart announced his retirement from the House, citing his desire to continue advocating for Cuban democracy as a private citizen. “I am convinced that in the upcoming chapter of the struggle, I can be

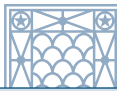
more useful to the inevitable change that will soon come to Cuba, to Cuba's freedom, as a private citizen dedicated to helping the heroes within Cuba," he said.³⁵ Mario Diaz-Balart, who had served a neighboring congressional district to the southwest for nearly a decade, won election in 2010 to succeed his brother in the 21st Congressional District.

FOR FURTHER READING

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